

## ***The Socialist and Labor Star: Strike and Suppression In West Virginia, 1912-1913***

by David A. Corbin

There is never peace in West Virginia because there is never justice . . . Medieval West Virginia! With its tent colonies on the bleak hills! With its grim men and women. When I get to the other side I shall tell God Almighty about West Virginia.

Mother Jones

**P**ROBABLY NO other aspect of American history can be studied with greater interest and enthusiasm than the Socialist movement in the United States during the Progressive Era. No other aspect has contained the aspirations and desires of so many Americans seeking constructive social-economic-political change. The Socialist movement contained the full spectrum of American society, from the theorizing intellectual to the middle-class reformer, to the discontented factory worker. Their desire to revolutionize the capitalist doctrines adopted by preceding generations spread into all classes, regions and political-nonpolitical organizations.

The Socialists were idealists. They always maintained the apocalyptic idealism of the European predecessor, Karl Marx, of the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism. They always thought in the terms of their ultimate goal, the establishment of the cooperative commonwealth. Socialism to the American Marxist was more than a concept; it was a crusade with deep meaning and purpose. It was a crusade for the dignity of man—man's right to work—his right to a decent standard of living. Although unanimity was rarely achieved, they all shared the idea that the American corporate structure must be abolished in favor of the establishment of the cooperative-commonwealth, and that transformation must not await the harsh inevitabilities promised by Social Darwinism.

Paradoxically, the American Socialists were highly pragmatic men. They toiled, organized, and agitated in behalf of the American laborer on the assembly line, at the glass plant, in the coal mine. They well understood the practicalities of a political pluralistic society.

No other aspect of the Progressive movement affords a more relative illustration of the American desire for justice and equality. No other phase of the movement played a more potent role, involved such energetic leaders or reflected with such accuracy the political and social ramifications of the Progressive's attacks on the evils of unbridled capitalism as did the Socialist movement. Although most of their efforts and contributions have been masked in the garb of the commonplace, the work of the American Socialists has been of paramount importance in the history of the American democratic movement.

Naturally, the history of the role played by the Progressive-Socialists must include a close study of the crusade on the local level. Only by studying the efforts of the rank-and-file Socialists can the historian obtain a complete examination and understanding of the American Marxists. Local histories reveal the political and economic realities that tested the Socialists' idealism and realism. More importantly, they reveal the integrity, determination, and aspirations of the people who adopted socialism as their means of salvation.

This paper is a look at one particular battlefield of the Socialist crusade. It is a study of a once thriving Socialist newspaper, *The Socialist and Labor Star*, in Huntington, West Virginia. The radical four-page weekly reported the events of the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike from the laborer's viewpoint. Its Socialist editors represented and articulated the interests of the union men and women of the strike district as no conservative United Mine Workers of America or state government could or would. Because it was effective in its purpose, it was suppressed.<sup>1</sup>

*The Socialist and Labor Star* began the turbulent path of heretical journalism in Huntington, West Virginia, in May 1912.<sup>2</sup> The expressed purpose of its appearance was twofold: First, it was to "fill a glaring void in West Virginia journalism." An editorial in the paper read: "This paper, owned and controlled and published by the workers of West Virginia, is the avowed spokesman for the great majority who have been denied a fair hearing." Secondly, *The Labor Star* was to uphold and safeguard the rights and interests of

<sup>1</sup> The following paper is an excerpt from a larger paper by the author, *The Socialist and Labor Star* (Huntington: Appalachian Movement Press, 1971). For a look at the role played by *The Socialist and Labor Star* and its editor, Wyatt H. Thompson in the statewide Socialist movement, see Frederick A. Barker, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> The original name of the paper was *The Socialist and Labor Star*. In April 1914, the name was changed to *The Labor Star*. For consistency and clarity the Socialist Journal will be referred to as *The Labor Star*.

the working class. This extended beyond exposing the corrupt realities of a "capitalist society" to encouraging and supporting the laborers of West Virginia to demand the equal distribution of wealth.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with its Socialist foundations the newspaper theorized on the principle that labor produced all wealth and moralized on the goal that all wealth belonged to labor.

The editor of *The Labor Star* was the West Virginia born Wyatt Hamilton Thompson. Comrade Thompson, as his future friends affectionately called him, was born in Malden just outside the State's capital city, Charleston, in 1885. At the age of nine he went to work in a nearby coal mine and at fourteen joined the United Mine Workers. After earning an apprenticeship in printing, Thompson worked on various newspapers throughout the State until his venture with *The Labor Star*. As a journalist he belonged to the International Typographical Union and served two terms as president of the Huntington Typo-graphical Union. He was also a delegate to the Huntington Trades and Labor Assembly and the assembly's delegate to the 1914 American Federation of Labor Convention. While editing *The Labor Star* without pay, the Socialist editor worked for the local *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*. Thompson's significance to the West Virginia Socialist movement has been recognized by Fred Barkey who referred to Thompson as "the intellectual leader of the West Virginia left wing" of the State party.<sup>4</sup>

There were a number of energetic and dedicated Socialists who worked for Comrade Thompson. The most noted and provocative was Ralph Chaplin. Already an experienced journalist and radical when he joined the staff of *The Labor Star*, Chaplin had served on the publications board of the influential *International Socialist Review* and had fought with the Mexican Revolutionaries. His role as a reporter and associate editor on the Socialist journal was a brief but vital one. Several of the articles he wrote for the Huntington paper appeared in national Socialist publications, as his name was becoming prominent in the radical movement. The experience he obtained working under the veteran editor Thompson was undoubtedly valuable when he later became editor of the official publication of the Industrial Workers of the World. As an artist, poet, pamphleteer, and editor, Chaplin was probably the most

<sup>3</sup> *The Labor Star*, April 3, 1914.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Chaplin, *Wobblly: The Rough and Tumbling Life of an American Radical* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 120; Personal Interview, Mrs. Francis Allen, one daughter of Wyatt H. Thompson, Columbus, Ohio, August 6, 1971; *The Labor Star*, May 1, 1914; Frederick A. Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia," 146.



prolific writer of the I.W.W. As a "Wobbly" he rose to such prominence as to be labeled by the eminent labor historian Philip Foner as "the right hand man to William 'Big Bill' Haywood."<sup>5</sup>

The account of *The Labor Star* might have been the typical story of the hundreds of Socialist journals that rose, flourished and disintegrated during the first two decades of the twentieth century had it not been for a violent and protracted coal strike in the southwest mining districts of West Virginia—The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike of 1912-1913. This catastrophic clash of economic interests, which resulted in personal and financial tragedy, played a dramatic and potent role in the life of *The Labor Star*.

The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike was one of the most brutal and bloody strikes during this epochal period of labor-management conflict. It began in the spring of 1912 as a result of the mine operators refusing to give in to the demands of the United Mine Workers and, in turn, the union refused to negotiate with the mine owners. Guns came into play; men, women and children were killed and wounded as the companies hired mine guards from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to protect company property and evict the striking miners from the company-owned houses. A United States Senate Investigating Committee described the conflict as:

... well-armed forces fighting for supremacy. Separate camps, organized, armed, and guarded, were established. There was much violence and some murders. Pitched battles were fought by the contending parties. Law and order disappeared, and life was insecure for both sides.

Martial law was declared three separate times. Eventually, all the Socialist organizers were arrested on order of the governor.<sup>6</sup>

During the first few months of the strike, *The Labor Star* gave little attention to the coal strike. But, as the violence increased, it soon became clear to Thompson and others in the Socialist movement that the strike was a great American labor struggle and not to be

<sup>5</sup> Chaplin, *Wobbly*, 116-130; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), IV, 155; Chaplin's two major works were *When the Leaves Come Out* (1917) and *Burn and Shadow* (1919). Later he wrote his autobiography which is cited in this paper. For a selection of Chaplin's poems and songs, see Joyce L. Kornbluh (ed.), *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), and Charles Patterson, *Paint Creek Miner* (Huntington: Appalachian Movement Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> "Report of Report on Investigation of Paint Creek Coal Fields of West Virginia," U. S. Senate, Committee of Education and Labor (March 1914), 6. For additional reading and references, see Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia* (Morgantown: McClain Printing, 1960); William G. Blumsted, "Martial Law Crushed Paint Creek Strikers in 1912-1913," *Charmoon*, West Virginia, *Sunday Gazette-Mail*, June 18, 1963, Section G, 7-9; Charles F. Carter, "West Virginia Coal Insurrection," *North American Review*, CXCVIII (October 1912), 405.

snubbed by any right thinking left winger. A strike committee was organized in Huntington and members of the newspaper's staff were selected to gather information and pictures of the war, while others were chosen to "bootleg" strike literature inside the strike zone.<sup>7</sup>

In March 1913 the newly elected governor of West Virginia, Henry D. Hatfield, attempted to fulfill a campaign promise of bringing the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike to an end. The governor's effort took the form of a compromise settlement. The coal operators and union officials accepted the proposal. However, the rank-and-file miners had to ratify the contract before it would be implemented. Apparently, the United Mine Workers and Hatfield were both concerned that the miners would not accept the terms. So a convention of miner delegates was called. The delegates accepted the terms of the settlement and on May 1, 1913 the strike was declared settled.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this attempt at ending the strike, the rank-and-file miners still opposed the settlement. Discontent remained rampant in the coal fields. Meanwhile, in Huntington, *The Labor Star* joined the discontented miners and called the settlement an "unholy alliance among the coal operators, the officials of the United Mine Workers and the West Virginia chief executive." Editor Thompson claimed the compromise had converted what could have been a "victory" for the miners into a "settlement."<sup>9</sup>

In its editorial columns *The Labor Star* charged Hatfield had issued the delegates to the convention a thirty-six hour demand, a choice between accepting the terms of the compromise or deportation of the "idle troublemakers" from West Virginia. *The Labor Star* further charged that the UMW officials had juggled the governor's terms in such a way that when the delegates thought they were

<sup>7</sup> Chaplin, *Wobblly* 119-121.

<sup>8</sup> The terms of the compromised contract were: First, the operators concede the miners their right to select a checkweighman; second, a nine-hour workday be recognized; third, that no discrimination be made against any miner for union participation; and fourth, that the operators grant a semimonthly pay. *United Mine Workers Journal* (April 24, 1913), 1, (May 15, 1913), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial, *United Mine Workers Journal* (April 24, 1913), 1; "International Executive Board on the West Virginia Situation," *United Mine Workers Journal* (May 15, 1913), 4; Wyatt H. Thompson, "How a Victory Was Turned into a Settlement," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (July 1913), 12-17. Thompson opposed the settlement because the terms of the proposal offered "nothing tangible" in concessions for the miners, and what was conceded was already guaranteed by law. More important, the editor asserted that the basic demands for which the miners had gone on strike were not included. These cardinal points, according to Thompson, were "the elimination of the hated mine guard system," "the right to belong to a union," and payment of wages based on adjacent organized districts. Wyatt H. Thompson, "Strike Settlement in West Virginia," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (August 1913), 87; Thompson, "Victory," 13.

voting on their own proposals, they were actually voting for the governor's.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the fraudulence, coercion and the fact that "nothing tangible" was granted to the miners, *The Labor Star* prophesied: "The strike on the Kanawha is not settled." The prophecy was fulfilled six weeks later when the rank-and-file miners rejected the "compromised proposal" and renewed the strike. The strike was of short duration. The operators this time agreed to the basic demands of the miners.<sup>11</sup>

*The Labor Star's* position on the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike and Hatfield's proposed settlement set in motion forces in the State Capital that had a profound effect on the future of the Socialist journal. In the early morning hours of May 9, 1913, a month before the miners renewed the strike, on orders from Governor Hatfield, the paper's presses were destroyed and confiscated and its editors incarcerated.

Events had taken place during the weeks preceding the suppression that made this attack appear imminent. The spring rains of 1913 brought a disastrous Ohio River flood which resulted in a "trial" raid on the plant of *The Labor Star*. Two companies of the militia were withdrawn from the Kanawha strike zone and were stationed in Huntington to "safeguard" the city. During the occupation of the town, Editor Thompson alleged:

They showed us what martial law in the Kanawha County had been. They confiscated whiskey and with their hides full of rot-gut, and their hands full of deadly weapons, they staggered about fighting both the citizens and each other, stealing everything that was not nailed down, and breaking into homes and carrying off what they wanted.<sup>12</sup>

In reaction to *The Labor Star's* exposure of these alleged scandals, the soldiers conspired to destroy the plant. The city's Socialists were informed of the plot and prepared to repel the invasion. A wagonload of rifles and revolvers were brought in and type cases were moved around to barricade the doors and windows.

<sup>10</sup> The accusation that Hatfield threatened to deport the "idle troublemakers" is supported by articles in *The New York Times*, *Charleston Gazette*, and *Huntington Herald-Examiner*. The charge that the governor and UMW officials deceived the convention delegates in their presentation of the separate proposals is affirmed by the *Kanawha Citizen* (Charleston, West Virginia), which was the only newspaper to provide daily coverage of the convention.

<sup>11</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, June 6, 1913; "Paint Creek Settlement," *United Mine Workers Journal* (July 24, 1913), 4; "Sanction of Miner's Union Is Given to Paint Creek and Cabin Creek Settlers," *United Mine Workers Journal* (July 3, 1913), 1; Wyatt H. Thompson, "The War Is Over," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (September 1913), 162.

<sup>12</sup> Louis H. March, "Hatfield's Challenge to the Socialist Party," *International Socialist Review*, XIII (June 1912), 443, 445; Chaplin, *Waddy*, 129.



When approximately 150 soldiers marched on the plant, according to Thompson: "They found twenty determined looking men with Winchesters . . . therefore, the gallant warriors decided to delay the attack."<sup>13</sup> The foray came several days later, in the dead of the night.

The edition before the "midnight pillage" was a bitter and caustic assault on the chief executive and the coal barons of West Virginia. The front page of the paper condemned Hatfield for the suppression of a Charleston Socialist newspaper, for attempting to bribe a Socialist justice of the peace and for ordering the arrest of a Socialist UMW attorney.<sup>14</sup>

More vitriolic and increasingly bitter was the same newspaper's editorial, "Hatfield Has Gone Mad." Editor Thompson assailed the chief executive as having an "absolute disregard for the rights of others." The Socialist editor claimed:

Hatfield was irritated beyond measure by the fact that the people of West Virginia . . . do not accept his dictatorial orders. . . . He has entered upon a course of brutal tyranny and oppression that has absolutely no precedent in American history.<sup>15</sup>

With the publication of that issue, Thompson realized that suppression and possible imprisonment was near. In an effort to delay the inevitable, the Socialist editor fled to Kentucky once the paper had been distributed. From the hills of the bordering state Thompson continued his onslaught on the West Virginia government by writing letters to other Socialist papers and magazines. In a letter to the *International Socialist Review*, Thompson wrote: "We got out *The Labor Star* . . . then I took a vacation with the emphasis on vacate."<sup>16</sup>

The sojourn to Kentucky postponed the suppression but it did not prevent it. Warrants for the arrests of Thompson and four other officials of the Socialist Printing Company were issued May 5, three days after the release of the May second edition. The arrival of Thompson in Huntington late on the night of May 8 to help prepare the May 9 edition was, according to the *Herald-Dispatch*, "the signal for the serving of the processes."<sup>17</sup>

Acting under orders issued by Hatfield, the military and civilian officials of Cabell County commenced their foray around two o'clock in the morning of May 9. The initial part of the raid was conducted

<sup>13</sup> Marcy, "Hatfield's Challenge," 882, 883; Chaplin, *Wobbly*, 128.  
<sup>14</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 2, 1913.  
<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 10, 1913; Marcy, "Hatfield's Challenge," 883.  
<sup>17</sup> *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 10, 1913.

by the Cabell County Deputy Sheriff Frampton who, with warrants from the governor, arrested and incarcerated the officials of the Socialist Printing Company, including editor Thompson.

Two of the plant's officials were held in custody in the jailers' residences at the instruction of the county sheriff who claimed they were not responsible for what was published in the paper. They were held there until the next afternoon and released. The other two men, including Thompson, were turned over to the military authorities and were deported to Kanawha County.

In the capital city they were placed in custody of the civilian authorities again for incarceration in the Kanawha County Jail. Their confinement lasted for fourteen days, at which time they were released on the verbal order of Hatfield without a formal charge having been brought against them.<sup>18</sup>

The confiscation and destruction of *The Labor Star's* plant by the state militia promptly followed the arrests. The military authorities entered the plant by crawling through the transom over the front door and "mobbing" the sole guard of the plant. After gaining control of the building, the diligent representatives of "law and order" proceeded to destroy the "job work," type, printing plates, and other immovable objects. At this point Deputy Sheriff Frampton, who accompanied the militia to the plant, protested against such "lawless action." The "midnight marauders" informed the deputy sheriff that they had "secret orders" from Hatfield to wreck the plant and proceeded about their business. Their execution took the form of smashing and breaking the "type forms" which had been completed for the next issue of *The Labor Star*, confiscating the copies of the paper already printed, and scattering the type over the flooded streets of Huntington.<sup>19</sup>

After destroying *The Labor Star* facilities, the soldiers proceeded to demolish the departments in which the Socialist Printing Company did commercial job printing. In a later edition of the paper, the Socialist editor claimed:

Every job in this department including forms of several sets of By-Laws for local unions, which had not yet been printed and

<sup>18</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913; *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 9, 1913; *Huntington Advertiser*, May 9, 1913; U. S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, *Conditions in the Paint Creek District, West Virginia*, Hearing, 42d Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1912), part III, 2092 [hereafter U. S. Senate, "Hearings"].

<sup>19</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913; *Huntington Advertiser*, May 9, 1913; Harold Shotton, "Awarded Return of Socialist Printing Company," *Hatfield v. Graham* 27 S. West Virginia State Supreme Court of Appeals. Two months after the raid a man brought through four pounds of "demolished type" that he had picked up over an area of four blocks from the plant; U. S. Senate, "Hearings," part III, 2096.



printed matters ready for delivery to local merchants were destroyed. All of the books, letters, invoices, files, and copy in the office were confiscated and carried away.<sup>20</sup>

This ruthless act of suppression and destruction took place eighty miles from the martial-law zone, and as *The Labor Star* and a United States Senate Investigating Committee pointed out, while the civil courts were still open. Even the Socialist National Executive Investigating Committee assigned to investigate the strike conditions, which was otherwise mild if not complimentary to the Hatfield administration, vehemently denounced the act. The latter referred to the suppression as the "dastardly crime of his [Hatfield's] administration which stands out as utterly without warrant and subject to the severest censure."<sup>21</sup>

A different voice was presented by another Huntington newspaper, *Herald-Dispatch*. Probably feeling that the suppression was a part of the local clean-up campaign then underway in the city, the Progressive party paper complimented the administration's actions. Referring to *The Labor Star's* articles as "treasonous" and its editors as "anarchists," the "Howling Dishpan" (as Thompson named it) asserted that, "The action of the military authorities . . . created no surprise, it was a natural sequence following the course pursued by that publication during the past three months."<sup>22</sup>

Following the arrests and destruction of the plant, the military authorities ransacked the home of Thompson. With the editor safely imprisoned, the invaders met with only the mild opposition of Mary Thompson, the editor's wife, who was recovering from a protracted illness. They entered the house with neither warning nor warrant and proceeded to search and confiscate the editor's personal correspondence, books, and files.<sup>23</sup>

Once more the deputy sheriff protested to the soldiers against the searching of a private residence without a warrant only to be informed again that they had "secret orders" from the governor. The invaders were primarily interested in obtaining *The Labor Star's* subscription book. Their efforts to secure it failed.<sup>24</sup>

The governor's reasons for the suppression were generally to the effect that *The Labor Star* was inciting riot and insurrection inside the strike zone. On the day of the suppression Hatfield claimed he

<sup>20</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913. The extent of the damage was estimated at \$2,000; Huntington, "Amended Return," 7.  
<sup>21</sup> *Wheeling Majority*, June 19, 1913.  
<sup>22</sup> *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 14, 1913.  
<sup>23</sup> U. S. Bureau, "Dissemination," part 111, 2102.  
<sup>24</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913; *Wheeling Majority*, May 15, 1913; U. S. Bureau, "Dissemination," part 111, 2103.

was acting within the authority granted the chief executive under "Chapter XIV" of the state code. The section of the code the governor referred to read:

He [the chief executive] may also cause to be apprehended and imprisoned all who in time of war, insurrection, or public danger, shall willfully give aid, support, or information to the enemy or insurgents or who, he shall have just cause to believe are conspiring or combining together to aid or support any hostile action against the United States or this state.<sup>25</sup>

Commenting on the governor's actions and justification, the constitutional historian Charles Fairman declared:

Only the period of the Civil War can afford a parallel to this episode. By virtue of a State Law, the Governor claimed to have authority to declare the existence of a state of war. After he made such a proclamation he felt warranted in exercising war powers.<sup>26</sup>

The *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* reported that the charge lodged against the men was "inciting to riot in connection with the coal miner's strike and is sequel to the publication of articles in the local newspaper which it is alleged, tended to kindle bitterness between the strikers and the operators."<sup>27</sup>

These same reasons were maintained a year later when Colonel George S. Wallace defended the governor's actions before the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals. Wallace said the chief executive

... had just cause to believe and did believe that the suppression of the issue of the Socialist paper in Huntington of the week of May 5, 1913, was necessary and proper in order to end the insurrection and riot and clash of arms then going on in the adjacent territory.<sup>28</sup>

To the supporters of *The Labor Star*, the wanton acts of suppression and confiscation reaffirmed and supplemented their belief in the tyranny and despotism of the Hatfield administration. They believed the general theme on which the governor centered these actions was their criticism of the administration's policies and the strike settlement. In the first issue following the pillage, *The Labor Star* addressed Governor Hatfield by stating:

Mr. Hatfield you are dealing with American citizens, not Russian serfs, and the man doesn't live who can tell us what to think and

<sup>25</sup> U. S. Senate, "Hearings," part II, 210.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Fairman, *The Law of Martial Rule* (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1926), 174.

<sup>27</sup> *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 9, 1913. It should be pointed out that although warrants were issued for the arrests and reasons were presented for the suppression, there was never "a formal charge" made by the governor or any other official. Senator Borah stated, "The complaint was never lodged with any Justice of the Peace or any court or anything of the sort." U. S. Senate, "Hearings," part III, 2095.

<sup>28</sup> George S. Wallace, "Brief for the Petitioner," *Hatfield v. Graham*, State Court of Appeals of West Virginia, October 1913, March 31, 1914.

what to say. . . . The settlement you proposed in the coal strike did not suit Comrade Thompson, and he thinking he was in a land where free expression and discussion is a cardinal principle spoke up like a man.

For this you send armed midnight marauders and destroyed our private property. And then you call us Anarchists.<sup>29</sup>

The suppression of *The Labor Star* prompted the Socialist Party of America to investigate the strike conditions of Paint Creek-Cabin Creek. The failure of the national party to become involved in the strike had caused considerable criticism of the national office. Typical in content, but probably the most influential, was the letter from the secretary of the West Virginia Socialist party, Harold Houston. The secretary's letter read: "West Virginians are disgusted with the paralytic apathy of the National Organization. It seems totally oblivious of the epochal struggle now on here." Pointing to the flagrant violations of constitutional rights and the suppression of *The Labor Star* Houston asked, "What have you to say about it?"<sup>30</sup>

The National Executive Committee of the Socialist party responded by assigning an investigating committee composed of three prominent American Socialists, Eugene V. Debs, Victor L. Berger and Adolph Germer. The four-time Socialist presidential candidate, Debs, was the undisputed spokesman for the Socialist Party of America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. For his efforts to establish the cooperative-commonwealth in the United States, Debs was commonly referred to as "Mr. Socialist."<sup>31</sup>

The other two members of the committee were also nationally prominent Socialists. Victor Berger was a conservative Socialist from Wisconsin who had been twice elected to the United States Congress by establishing a strong Socialist machine in Milwaukee. The Wisconsin State party protested to the National Executive Committee for appointing him, claiming they could not "spare him." Their objection was overruled. Germer was a national officer in the United Mine Workers of America and a member of the Socialist National Executive Committee.

The committee was assigned a dual role. First, it was to obtain in an "authoritative way," the facts of the labor situation and present

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Senate, "Hearings," part 1, 202; *Wheeling Majority*, May 15, 1913; *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913.

<sup>30</sup> "Minutes of Meeting of National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of America," *The Party Builder*, XXIX (May 21, 1913), 7; Grace Silver, "National Committee Attending Socialist Party," *International Socialist Review*, XIII (June 6, 1913), 477-479.

<sup>31</sup> Probably the best biography on Debs is Ray Ginger's *Eugene V. Debs* (New York: Collier Books, 1960). Unfortunately, this competent study omits Debs' involvement in the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike.



them in the form of a report to the party members and to gain an audience with the president and request him to take such action as he may think proper "to secure the aggrieved party members and to the unionists the rights and the protection to which they are entitled under the Constitution and the laws."<sup>32</sup>

Second, the committee was instructed to work in harmony with the officials of the United Mine Workers and to promote the cooperation between that union and the Socialist party in compiling their report. During the Executive Committee's discussion on the West Virginia labor conflict, the proposal was made to send as many organizers as possible to the State. This suggestion was vetoed in fear that the agitators "might not be able to work in harmony with the United Mine Workers." The controversy was settled by instructing the committee to cooperate with the union officials.<sup>33</sup>

The committee arrived in Charleston on May 19, 1913 and began its investigation the next day. Its research brought the members into contact with the striking miners, state Socialists, the incarcerated Thompson, and most importantly Governor Henry D. Hatfield and the officials of the United Mine Workers. Debs interviewed the chief executive on May 23, after Hatfield refused to meet with the entire committee.

Immediately following his conversation with Hatfield, local newspapers published articles claiming Debs endorsed the governor's policies. "Mr. Socialist" was quoted as saying that Hatfield "had a difficult problem on hand, but we believe and are convinced that conditions are improving."<sup>34</sup>

The state Socialist locals and presses, convinced that the press interviews were a "capitalist conspiracy," ignored them at first. However, as the reports increased and became more consistent, both the *Wheeling Majority* and *The Labor Star* telegraphed Debs regarding the accuracy and validity of the statements. To both papers the Socialist leader replied: "absolutely false. You will receive authentic report soon."<sup>35</sup>

When the investigating committee's report was made public two weeks later, *The Labor Star* declared: "Socialists failed as Investigators." While briefly castigating the coal operators and former

<sup>32</sup> *Wheeling Majority*, May 22, 1913; "Minutes of Meeting of National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of America," *The Party Builder*, XXXI (June 7, 1913), 4. After the "Lynn Resolution" was passed by the U.S. Senate, the National Executive Committee decided it unnecessary to present the report to the president; *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 28, 1913.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, "National Meeting," 179-180; "Minutes," XXXI, 4; *Wheeling Majority*, May 25, 1913.

<sup>34</sup> *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, May 22, 1913.

<sup>35</sup> *Wheeling Majority*, May 22, 1913; *The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1913.

Governor Glasscock, the report was generally favorable to Hatfield. The report read: "We freely admit having given the Governor [Hatfield] the credit he is justly entitled to . . . we insist that he shall not be held accountable for the crimes committed under the administration of his servile predecessor."<sup>36</sup>

The following issue of *The Labor Star* vehemently castigated the investigating committee's report. Thompson labeled it "a weak mass of misstatements . . . and a sickening eulogy of Dictator Hatfield." Referring to Debs as a "Sentimentalist," Berger a "compromising vote hunter," and Germer an "official of the UMW," the Socialist editor claimed the selection of the committee was unfortunate. Debs and other members of the committee were accused of being misinformed and misled into endorsing the Hatfield administration by the union officials who had accompanied the committee members from the time of their arrival in West Virginia to their departure. They were the same officials who had been instrumental in working out the proposed settlement with the chief executive.

Thompson refused to publish the report in his paper because he said: "We have never, and never will, devote any of our space to whitewashing a cheap tool of the capitalist class—not even when the whitewash is mixed by members of our own party."<sup>37</sup> Thompson's retort initiated a bitter and protracted feud and dialogue between *The Labor Star* and "Mr. Socialist."

In his first reply to *The Labor Star's* editor, Debs briefly requested that the paper print the report and let the people "judge for themselves."<sup>38</sup> Thompson, taking advantage of the paper's financial difficulty, replied that "Debs' letter reaches me just as we are preparing to go to press with the abbreviated issue of the paper. . . . Consequently we cannot go thoroughly into a defense of our last week's article." He did proceed to point out "a few of the more glaring misstatements," which he claimed were "inexcusable and very hurtful to the cause of the struggling worker in the State." The editor concluded that the report served only to exempt Hatfield and the UMW officials from the accusations of the West Virginia

<sup>36</sup> *Wheeling Mailer*, June 12, 1913. As mentioned earlier in this article, the committee's report did denounce the suppression of *The Labor Star* as the "dastardly crime of its [Hatfield's] administration which stands out as utterly without warrant and subject to the severest censure."

<sup>37</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, June 13, 1913. Thompson was not alone in his denunciation of Debs and his report. Several national Socialist periodicals, including *The Socialist Review*, sided with Thompson. Additionally, many of the UMW locals issued resolutions castigating the union's leadership and the Debs report. Further, as mentioned earlier, the miners proved Thompson's assessment correct when they renewed the strike.

<sup>38</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, June 21, 1913.

Socialists for their role in threatening, imprisoning, and coercing the rank-and-file miners into returning to work.<sup>39</sup>

The following week brought another invidious reply from Debs. "Mr. Socialist" wrote to Thompson again insisting that the report be published along with *The Labor Star's* attacks. Debs claimed:

A thousand times I have had the experience of a capitalist paper denouncing a speech I had made without allowing its readers to see a word of it. I was neither surprised nor offended. I expected nothing better from the capitalist papers. But I do expect different treatment from a socialist paper. I would not change a single word of the report. . . . There are those who are assailing our committee's report today who in less than six months will wish they could retract their words.<sup>40</sup>

Although Debs claimed he would "not change a single word" of the report, his next correspondence with *The Labor Star's* editor read to the contrary. Debs explained:

I should have made the exception heretofore noted in reference to the administration under which Mother Jones, John Brown, C. H. Boswell and other comrades [sixty-four in total] were tried by the military commission. . . . This error of dates for which I alone am responsible I frankly confess.<sup>41</sup>

In exonerating Hatfield, the investigating committee had reported: "It was under the administration of Glasscock and not Hatfield . . . that the military commission was created: Mother Jones . . . [et al.] were court martialed and convicted."<sup>42</sup>

In an earlier issue *The Labor Star* had demonstrated the fallacy of this statement. Hatfield was inaugurated on March 4, and the courts-martial were the following week. The Kanawha County Circuit Court had issued a writ forbidding the enforcement of these "drum-head" courts. When the county sheriff attempted to serve the court order, the provost marshal, under orders from the governor, "forcibly prevented him from performing his civil duty."<sup>43</sup>

Taking advantage of Debs' confession, Thompson commented:

Now that Comrade Debs has begun to compare the report with the FACTS in the case we may hope that he will ultimately apologize for the outrage he perpetrated upon to "exculpating" Hatfield of acts no one had ever charged him with and in denying for him the things we had charged him with.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, June 27, 1913.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, July 4, 1913.

<sup>42</sup> *Washington Mercury*, June 19, 1913.

<sup>43</sup> W. H. Thompson, "A Reply to Debs," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (August 1913), 136-137.

<sup>44</sup> *The Socialist and Labor Star*, July 4, 1913.



The feud between *The Labor Star* and "Mr. Socialist" soon achieved national prominence. Major Socialist publications including the *Appeal to Reason*, *New York Call*, and *The International Socialist Review* began to publish letters from Debs and Thompson and commented on the controversy.

*The International Socialist Review* was one of the first to speak out on the Debs-Thompson conflict. In an editorial the periodical cited "a very few of the opinions" it had received criticizing the committee's report. These citations were followed by headlines and editorials of "capitalist papers that praised the investigation and used the report . . . to discredit Socialist and union opponents of Hatfield." The editorial concluded with a condemnation of the UMW compromising officials, Hatfield, and the investigating committee and explained, "it is the rank and file of the UMW who have found it necessary to fight and expose the Governor as well as their own officers."<sup>45</sup>

National attention intensified on the feud when Debs publicly claimed that the Industrial Workers of the World was responsible for the opposition to Hatfield and the committee's report. Using the "Wobbly-Scapegoat" tactic that he used in similar situations, Debs evaded the validity and accuracy of *The Labor Star's* attack and claimed that the West Virginia Socialists opposed the governor's settlement "because a contract had been signed." He explained that this was the true "animus" of the report's critics and assailants.<sup>46</sup>

Claiming he was an "industrial unionist, but not an industrial bummercyeite," Debs wrote: "The whole trouble is that some Chicago I.W.W.-ites, in spirit at least, are seeking to disrupt and drive out the United Mine Workers to make room for the I.W.W. and its program of sabotage and strike at the ballot box with an ax." Having distorted and misrepresented the issues and facts involved, "Mr. Socialist" proceeded with one of his customary tirades against the industrial organization. Debs wrote:

The I.W.W.-ites have never done one particle of organizing, or attempted to, in the dangerous districts of West Virginia. The United Mine Workers have been on the job for years. . . . The United Mine Workers is steadily evolving into a thoroughly industrial union . . . but never in a thousand years will the efforts of these disrupters unionize the miners of West Virginia.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Mary E. Mann, "The Hatfield Whitewash," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (July 1913), 25; Mary E. Mann, "Unions Repudiate Debs' Escort, Haggerty," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (July 1913), 22.  
<sup>46</sup> *The Labor Star*, August 7, 1914; Eugene V. Debs, "Debs Denounces Critics," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (August 1913), 104-106.  
<sup>47</sup> Debs, "Debs Denounces Critics," 104-106.

In response to Debs' attempt to tar *The Labor Star* with Wobbly radicalism, Thompson immediately answered this unfair and irrational attempt to imply guilt by association. In his reply, the Socialist editor brought the "real" issues into perspective and the true reasons *The Labor Star* assailed the proposed settlement and the report. The accusations were generally the same as in the earlier denouncements; the report exonerated a governor who had threatened and coerced the miners into returning to work and the state administration's flagrant violation of the constitutional rights of the involved citizens. Next the Socialist editor repudiated Debs' charge that the opposition was based on "Wobbly philosophy." Thompson wrote:

Speaking for myself, I will say that I have never seen a real live I.W.W.-ite . . . I have heard of this new species from the capitalist press and I note that the capitalists are very hostile toward it. I consider that a good recommendation for a labor organization, and will certainly not speak slightly of it. As for the I.W.W. being responsible for the attack of the Mine Worker's officials, who deliberately attempted to betray the Kanawha strikers, I think Comrade Debs' fear was father to the thought.<sup>48</sup>

Several interesting factors should be discussed at this point. First, there is some question as to the accuracy of Thompson's statement: "I have never seen a real-live I.W.W.-ite." Ralph Chaplin had belonged to the organization before coming to West Virginia, but during the time he was with *The Labor Star* he was not an official member. He did speak about the "one-big union" idea to fellow workers on the staff, but he admitted he was able to convert only one person.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, Thompson used the line of reasoning that Debs later used in upholding the I.W.W. "The I.W.W.," Debs said four years later, "is anathema wherever capitalism wields the lash and drains the vein of its exploited victims. It is a wonderful compliment!" At the time of this article the entire radical movement was in the process of being emasculated of its leaders and energy by the war administration of Woodrow Wilson, and Debs continuously spoke of the need for solidarity. In the years 1912-1914, the Socialist party was at its height, and the future erroneously forecasted the advent of the cooperative commonwealth. "Mr. Socialist" was in a position to denounce the deviants from his proposed "Sound Socialist Tactics."<sup>50</sup>

Debs' contention that the West Virginia Socialists were "Wobbly"

<sup>48</sup> W. H. Thompson, "A Reply to Debs," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (August 1915), 397.

<sup>49</sup> Chaplin, *Writings*, 122-123.

<sup>50</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "I, W. W. Rogers," *International Socialist Review*, XVIII (February 1916), 285-286; Eugene V. Debs, "Sound Socialist Tactics," *International Socialist Review*, III (February 1912), 421-422.

oriented and were opposed to Hatfield, the proposed settlement, and the report "because a contract had been signed" is seconded by the historian James Weinstein in *Decline of Socialism in America*.<sup>51</sup> The author of this paper does not accept this conclusion. Thompson never proposed "to strike at the ballot box with an ax," but favored quite the contrary. Through his editorials he continuously encouraged the people of Huntington to join the Socialist party and to vote the Socialist ticket, which he said represented the "political expression of the working class." Thompson himself ran for the office of county clerk in 1914 and supported the Socialist candidate for Congress from the Fifth Congressional District.<sup>52</sup>

Evidence does reveal that Thompson was opposed to the Hatfield proposal and the report because it would turn a "victory into a settlement" and because the rank and file never accepted it. The miners proved Thompson's assessment correct when they went on strike again in June 1913. *The Labor Star's* editor favored the second contract, which to him represented a "victory."

Based on available and examined evidence, this writer agrees with the position of *The Labor Star* in condemning the investigating committee's report for exculpating the governor and the United Mine Worker officials' contract which the rank and file never accepted. Conclusions can be affirmed that:

The committee was impelled to whitewash Hatfield because the officials of the U.M.W. of A. had endorsed Hatfield's conduct and the Paint-Cabin Creek "settlement". . . . If the Socialist Committee condemned Hatfield, it would lead to condemnation and exposure of the "settlement" and the treachery of the officials of the U.M.W. of A.<sup>53</sup>

Debs supported this assertion when he concluded the committee's report by writing, "At the close of our labors we rejoiced to see the better understanding that existed between the UMW and the Socialist Party, which we sought in every way to encourage and promote."<sup>54</sup>

The feud between Debs and Thompson was exemplary of the conditions that effected the entire Socialist movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The American Socialists often agreed on common goals, but differed on the means to obtain those goals. In the early 1920s the ideological differences of the Socialist movement

<sup>51</sup> James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 24, 25.

<sup>52</sup> *The Labor Star*, July 21, 1914.

<sup>53</sup> Fred B. McDuck, "The Betrayal of the West Virginia Rednecks," *International Socialist Review*, XIV (July 1913), 18-22.

<sup>54</sup> *Huntington Messenger*, June 13, 1913.



on the national level became apparent when the party began factionalizing into numerous branches. The clash in the hills of West Virginia was a small sampling of the national confrontation one decade later.

The courageous efforts of the men and women of *The Labor Star*, as well as other Appalachians, is not revealed in our history. The historic struggles of Appalachians has been garbed in a mass of deceptions and falsehoods that disguise our true heritage. As a result, the contemporary image of the Appalachian "hillbilly" reveals a social pathology and naiveté. This unfortunate portrayal is perpetuated by American institutions. Serial television programs such as "Green Acres," "Hee Haw," and the "Beverly Hillbillys" portray Appalachians as amusing and pathetic people. To capture and interest the national audience, the "hillbillys" are depicted being "conned into buying the White House, coddling Arnold the talking pig, and rising from the cornpatch to crack the sickest jokes" on television. These programs have been labeled "the most intensive effort ever exerted by a nation to belittle, demean, and otherwise destroy a minority people within its boundaries."<sup>55</sup>

Contemporary literature and studies also depreciate the phantasm of the "hillbilly." Jack Weller, a Presbyterian minister from New York, in his book *Yesterday's People*, classified the peoples of Appalachia as fatalistic, individualistic, traditionalistic, regressive, insecure, existence-oriented, *ad nauseam*. By briefly studying a few centers of the Appalachian subculture, Weller generalized on the Appalachian people. His analysis is confusing, misleading, and unfortunate.<sup>56</sup>

What is wrong is not the way our history has happened, but the way it has been presented and written. Historical studies, as the one just presented, reveal that the men and women of Appalachia have neither been pathetic nor passé. With dignity and aggressiveness they have resisted and challenged the economic tyranny and corruption that has historically plagued the Mountain State. The history of West Virginia, from the struggle against the Virginia slavocracy to the recent opposition of strip mining and support of Black Lung legislation, is indicative of the integrity and determination of a proud people who have resisted while others, including their sophisticated neighbors, acquiesced to the harsh inevitabilities of the corporate society and technocracy.

<sup>55</sup> James Bumsome, *Annihilating the Hillbilly* (Huntington: Appalachian Movement Press, 1972), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966).

The staff of *The Labor Star* fought what it saw as the malignancies of the corporate economy effectively and defiantly. Using their newspaper as a forum, the Huntington radicals articulated the interests of the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek coal miners against the coal operators. They verbally challenged the servile state government as personified by Governor Hatfield.

Despite the devastating raids of Hatfield and the capitulation of the Socialist Party of America to the United Mine Workers and the state government, the staff of *The Labor Star* never strayed from its goals nor surrendered its ideals. Words such as self-determination and independence, that are mere abstractions to most, were existing realities to them. Freedom to these proud West Virginians meant "more than nothing left to lose." It meant individual integrity, industrial democracy, and the ability to choose among more pleasant alternatives. Influenced by what he observed of the people of Appalachia during his brief stay in the Mountain State, the nationally active and prominent radical, Ralph Chaplin, in his autobiography, reminisced: "I don't think I have ever encountered such passionate love for freedom as I found in the hills of West Virginia."<sup>57</sup>

Additional investigations and studies of the people of West Virginia will reveal the accuracy of Chaplin's belief. The efforts of the staff of *The Labor Star* were not unique, but typical of a determined people who have resisted political corruption and economic domination.